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ABSTRACT

Boundaries are limits that define us as separate from others. Although this concept is a familiar one in personal and addictions counseling, it is seldom discussed in career development or career counseling. Yet boundary issues arise constantly in working relationships, in the job-application process, among employees, and especially with supervisors and managers. This paper briefly describes the concept of boundaries and their formation, explores some typical work-related boundary issues, and provides some suggestions for setting and maintaining healthy boundaries. (GCP)

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Oops, You're Stepping on My Boundaries!

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Introduction

The concept of boundaries and boundary management is frequently discussed in the literature on counsellors and their ethical responsibilities to clients. A boundary is an edge or limit that defines a person as separate from others (Katherine 1991, 2000). Webb (1997) defines boundaries as contextually based limits prescribed through individuals' cultural, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual doctrines. Lazarus (1994) states that ethical principles such as boundaries focus on situations where people are being exploited, harassed, or discriminated against by others, especially therapists, who are in a position of power. Many theorists agree that it is imperative for professionals to integrate boundary awareness into their interactions with clients (Corey, Corey, and Callanan 1998, Hetherington 2000, Webb 1997, Lazarus 1994). However, there is disagreement on explicit rules for all contexts, situations, and roles. The issue of dual or multiple role relationships is particularly challenging. Overlapping relationships are unavoidable, especially for those who live in rural areas, are politically and/or socially active in their communities, or who occupy various roles within their professional and personal lives (Corey et al. 1998, Webb 1997).

Most of what has been written about boundaries focusses on counsellor behaviours in personal therapy and counselling, especially related to addictions and sexual abuse. However, this topic is seldom addressed in career development and career counselling, even though boundary issues affect all aspects of peoples' lives and interpersonal relationships. Some examples of work-related situations where there may be boundary problems include time use, communication with co-workers and colleagues, relationships, working from home, and work-related socializing.

The concept of boundaries is a fairly simple but important one to apply in the field of career development and counselling. The purpose of the present paper is to briefly describe the concept of boundaries and their formation, to explore some typical work-related boundary issues, and to provide some suggestions for setting and maintaining healthy boundaries.

Understanding Boundaries

Skin is a physical boundary. An intact physical boundary preserves life. There are also emotional, relational, spiritual,

and sexual boundaries. There are limits to what is safe and appropriate. There are borders that separate you and your life from others. You have a set of feelings and reactions that are distinctly yours. Your response to the world is unique, based on your own perceptions, your special history, your values, goals, and concerns. No one acts or reacts exactly as you do.

Simply put, personal boundaries are a set of flexible and inflexible limits that let good in and keep bad out (Katherine 2000). Boundaries define your identity, bring order to your life, and protect you from violators. They preserve your purpose and goals in life, including work life. Boundaries are not an excuse to be selfish, irresponsible, rude, arrogant, superior, judgmental, or brutally honest. These behaviours are aggressive, whereas boundary behaviours are assertive.

Need for Boundaries

The quality of the boundary choices you make will largely depend on how much you value yourself (Black and Enns 1997). When you consider the parts of your life that are working well, this "rightness" and integrity comes from the limits you have set to protect those parts. Constructing a solid, effective personal boundary system is a process that takes time and requires maintenance. However, Katherine (2000) asserts that any aspect of a person's life that is not working can be improved by paying attention to boundaries. Moreover, techniques that work in one area, such as family relationships, can be applied to other areas of life, such as workplace relationships.

There appears to be more need than before for people to pay attention to boundaries. There is an ever-increasing population, especially in urban areas, and this increases the number and complexity of peoples' relationships and daily interactions. Also, fewer societal boundaries and structures exist today. This means there is less agreement on appropriate behaviours and interactions with others in personal and work contexts. In addition, technology and electronic media have had a major impact on communication.

Formation of Boundaries

Infants are born unaware of being separate. However, children quickly learn about "I" and "you." This is the beginning of a set of boundaries. Children shape their identities by trying a behaviour, watching for a response, then making a decision to adopt the behaviour, discontinue it, or try an alternative.

Reactions from others are the most important cue to whether or not to keep a behaviour or a boundary. However, it is critical to remember that peoples' reactions reflect their own personalities, self-views, circumstances, and limitations. Adult actions are not always accurate or appropriate, and so children's early conclusions and decisions about boundary behaviours may not be, either. It is important to revisit and re-evaluate these early beliefs, in order to determine if they are still appropriate.

Boundaries exist on a continuum, from none, to overly rigid ones (defenses), with clear boundaries in the middle. On either side of clear boundaries are partial or damaged ones. Individuals may be able to set clear boundaries in some situations (such as overtime work) but not others (such as staff meetings) or with some people (such as co-workers) but not others (such as supervisors).

Defenses Versus Boundaries

Being failed or rejected by someone in a position of trust is an extremely difficult experience, and can often set the stage for how much people will risk again. They may withdraw totally and build walls for protection, a "defended" state of being. People are defended when they stand behind a unilateral protection in order to avoid feelings they cannot bear to experience again. So everything is shut out. Children and adults may choose a defended state if their life circumstances are dangerous or nonsupportive. Knowing how someone has come to be defended may help you to understand his or her behaviour. However, no matter how badly someone has been treated, it is still not acceptable to hurt others, either physically or emotionally. Defended people need professional support in order to address their issues successfully.

Boundary Errors and Violations

Crossing a boundary accidentally is a boundary error. It becomes a violation if your attempts to correct or educate the other person are disregarded. In any situations where a boundary violator is in a position of power greater than the person who is violated, the violation is automatically more serious. An employer has power over employees, an adult has power over a child, and a professional is usually perceived as having more power than the client. When you depend on someone else for something you need, such as a paycheque or a service, you have an investment in remaining in the situation until you no longer have that need. This is why there are codes of ethical behaviour.

When a person is dismissed, rejected, denied opportunity, discriminated against, or undervalued because of gender, that's a gender boundary violation. If it is because of culture or ethnicity, that is a cultural boundary violation.

People in positions of power are not given the same latitude as others when it comes to boundary errors. They should already know that it is a violation to use their position to exploit others. When you see someone violating a boundary that is built into a situation, be warned. This is a person who is willing to exploit others for personal gratification or gain. If you are unable to leave a situation where your boundaries are violated, use the boundary of distance. Use physical distance as much as you can. Use emotional distance whenever you have to interact with the person. Keep interactions short, clear, and businesslike.

Challenges to Boundaries

No matter who you are or how well-defined your life is, your boundaries will be challenged almost every day. Things are always moving and needing adjustments. Also, boundary decisions are personal. Your lines are not necessarily drawn where your boss, partner, friend, or child would draw them. Honesty, discussion, and mutual respect are needed to set and maintain boundaries. Some people may find the idea of your owning your own life offensive. To say that you own your own car, so you will make choices about it, seems logical and non-threatening. However, to say that you own your own life, so you will make choices about it, may sound too arrogant or independent.

Your own resistance to setting boundaries will come in the form of misbeliefs, thinking errors, addictions, and defenses. You may have adopted these patterns to protect yourself from pain or discomfort, and you can let them go when you have boundaries to support you. Change is challenging, especially with new behaviours or resistance from others. However, if you become aware of fear, consider the message carefully. You may be going too fast, or into unsafe territory.

Tips for Setting Boundaries

You do not have to construct a wall to protect your territory, and you do not have to become hypervigilant, but you do need to learn to pay attention. Below are some tips for strengthening boundary-setting skills.

- Set boundaries clearly (preferably without anger) and in as few words as possible.
  Avoid justifying, rationalizing, or apologizing. Offer a brief explanation, if it makes sense to do that. You will not be able to maintain constructive relationships until you can tell people what is and is not appropriate for you.

- You cannot simultaneously set a boundary and take care of other's feelings.
  These two acts are mutually exclusive. Decide which has the higher priority.

- Anger, rage, complaining and whining are clues that boundaries need to be set.
  Signs that you may need to set a boundary include feeling threatened, overwhelmed, or victimized by someone. You may need to get angry to set a boundary, but you do not need to stay resentful to enforce it.

- You will be tested when you set boundaries.
  There is no point in setting a boundary until you are ready to enforce it. Be prepared for resistance. Often the key to boundaries is not to convince other people, but to convince yourself.

- Be prepared to follow through by acting in congruence with your boundaries.
  What you do must match what you say. If you say your boundary is not to let others call you at home about work, but you respond when they do, there is no boundary yet. Consequences and ultimatums enforce boundaries. Boundaries are intended to take care of you, not to control others. If you set a boundary not to be around people who gossip, it does not force others to change their behaviour. Your choice is whether or how you will interact with them.

- Some people are happy to respect our boundaries.
  Some people may get angry with us for setting boundaries, particularly if we change a system by setting a boundary where we previously had none. People become especially angry if you have been taking care of them or allowing them to control you, and you decide to change that.

- Timing is important.
  You can set boundaries only when you are ready. When

changing an established pattern, choose time, place, and people to maximize your chances of success.

- A support system helps when establishing and enforcing boundaries.
  Find trustworthy co-workers, friends, or family members with whom you can discuss, debrief, and practice.

- Humour can help when setting boundaries.
  Making a joke or using a humorous analogy can diffuse a potentially uncomfortable or unequal situation. For example, you can say, "At risk of being voted off the island (referring to the Survivor television series), I'd like to suggest that..." However, be careful not to detract from the seriousness of your message.

- Thicken your boundary before you have to interact with a defended or hostile person.
  Some situations call for stronger boundaries. When you have to interact with difficult people, consider how you might be challenged and prepare some clear boundary statements. Keep your interaction short and clear.

Time Boundaries

Time is a precious commodity—how are you using it? When you manage your time according to your own healthy sense of ordering things, your own life will work. This is true, even if your way is different from the way of someone who is efficient or from some "fail-safe" method promoted in a time-management book. You are the final authority on how to use your time, because no one will pay the consequences for how you decide to use it as much as you will.

You may choose to sell or pledge some of your time to a person, group, or organization. That person, boss, client, or customer will then have jurisdiction over a defined part of your time. However, you will still need to set boundaries on what that jurisdiction includes. The best time to negotiate is usually at the beginning of a working relationship. However, you will need to monitor the situation and make changes as you go along.

There is continuum of time boundaries. At the extremes are those who always give away their time (and the result is chaos), and those who never allow flexibility (and the result is rigidity).

Neither extreme is good. An agenda or plan that collapses too easily can result in having the way you use the minutes of your life be dictated by others. On the other hand, rigid scheduling that does not allow for a change of mind or new need creates tension and distance from co-workers or clients.

Perceptions differ, and there is no single right way. A person who appears rigid to others may feel organized and in control. A person who appears disorganized may feel flexible and available. Having good time boundaries means knowing how to create a balanced schedule, knowing when to shift events and when to keep them, and knowing how to adjust commitments when your personal needs require attention. Healthy time boundaries are flexible.

Punctuality

When your use of time has an impact on someone else, this is a relationship issue. Then the boundaries involved are more complicated. For example, agreement to meet someone at a certain time is a contract with that person. If you are late, your are using up a portion of the other person's life. Being habitually late affects business as well as other relationships. If you or others are regularly late, try to find out why. Is it disorganization, over-commitment, poor planning, resentment, or lack of respect? Identifying the reason for lateness will help you decide how to address it. As people improve their boundaries, they become more punctual, demonstrating respect. If you have difficulty, remember that it is easier to be early than to be exactly on time.

Communication Boundaries

Making a Request

If you want something, make a clear, straightforward request. If your request doesn't fit the nature of your current relationship, acknowledge that. "I realize I have not responded promptly to your last two messages, and I would like to apologize for that. I would like to ask you to attend a meeting tomorrow." Remember that the other person may refuse your request.

Responding to a Request

Acknowledge the other person's request, or ask for clarification. Before saying yes or no, ask yourself if you might benefit from any changed conditions, such as more time or different

circumstances. If so, communicate the changes you propose, or set boundaries on the original request. You may negotiate a compromise. Pay attention to what is missing in a conversation (such as clarity, or acknowledgement of coercion). If your request, response, question, or counter-offer is ignored, that is still a response.

Techniques for Handling Inappropriate Questions
You don't have to answer every question put to you. Canadians tend to be schooled in courtesy and "being polite." Below are some examples of responses to the inappropriate question "How much did you make at X?"

- Ask them a question. "How much did you make last year?"
- Turn the topic to them. "Sounds like earnings are very important to you."
- Answer in a way that doesn't reveal anything you don't want to share. "Enough to keep me going!"
- Ask them why they are asking. "Why do you ask?" or "I wonder why you'd like to know that."
- Say you don't know them well enough to answer.
- End the conversation, or change the topic.

Information Boundaries
Be careful with your own special or personal information. Make sure others are trustworthy and willing to honour what you've told them as private. If people repeatedly miss the point, respond critically, or "one-up" you, they are sending the message that they can't handle your revelations, achievements, or happiness. Find someone more supportive.

Conclusion

The concept of boundaries has numerous applications to employment and career. Although there are difficulties and challenges involved, paying time and attention to effective boundary setting will result in a more productive and satisfying work life.

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